

PROFESSOR TOYNBEE SURRENDERS THE WEST

Do the Facts Justify This Defeatism?

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SINCE Bertrand Russell in 1948 gave the first Reith Lectures over the BBC under the title "Authority and the Individual," these broadcast lectures have become almost a national institution in Great Britain. They provide a platform for serious exposition of philosophical opinions to a public far wider than could be reached by writing a book, publishing articles in a learned journal, or lecturing in a university.

For this past year, the Reith Lectures were given by Professor Arnold Toynbee on "The World and the West." They have just been published in book form in the United States by Oxford University Press, at a time when the principal nations of the West are deadlocked in a war with Communist China, when the Assembly of the United Nations still has as its chief immediate problem the ending of the war, when the Middle East is in a (mainly anti-British) ferment, and when Africa is torn by new tensions arising from the opposite extremes of Malanism and Mau Mau. Certainly no subject of high discourse could be more relevant to questions of the hour than that of historical relations between the Western and non-Western forms of civilization, and no speaker could be more appropriate than Professor Toynbee, whose monumental work *A Study*

of History has been largely devoted to the tracing of such relations. His wide learning and bold speculative mind command the most serious attention for the general view of human history which he has expounded in these lectures. It may be doubted, however, whether his theory is one which adequately explains the phenomena of the contemporary world, and its premises require to be subjected to close critical analysis before it can be taken as a basis for our thinking.

THERE are two possible alternative conceptions of the history of civilization which may be called, respectively, the unilinear and the pluralist. In the former the evolution from Paleolithic to Proto-Atomic Man is regarded as a continuous stream of development common to mankind as a whole and passing everywhere through a series of stages *a b c d*. . . . Sections of mankind lag behind in earlier stages, but if they do so, they must in the long run either "catch up" by hurrying through the stages they have not yet reached, or else be replaced by peoples of more advanced culture. Such a view of world history was naturally associated with the idea of progress as it came to be held by *philosophes* and liberal thinkers during the 18th and 19th centuries. The mid-Victorian Englishman, counting himself "the heir of all the ages in the foremost ranks of time," felt that he stood on a steadily ascending escalator; he might take some interest in his own direct line of past history, but he could hardly be induced to pay serious attention to non-European forms of civilization which he regarded much as a successful businessman might view former rivals who had either gone bankrupt or remained back-street shopkeepers.

The Marxists also belonged to the same way of thinking, in spite of their dire pre-

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dictions of social catastrophe. In contrast to the easygoing optimism of the bourgeois progressives, the Marxists saw an ever sharpening class struggle which would explode in social revolution, but this likewise was an inevitable progress; the workers would necessarily win in the impending conflict, they would make their revolution in the countries that were economically the most advanced, and they would raise mankind to a higher level of productivity and culture. Marx and his followers did not take seriously the possibility either that the conflicts brought about by the contradictions of capitalism might involve the world in a reversion to primitive savagery, or that the proletarian victory might lead to a decline in what the Marxists themselves regarded as the essentials of civilization.

The First World War, however, brought a new sense of the fragility and insecurity of civilized society and called in question the reality of progress. Liberals might hail the new era of Wilsonian self-determination and the League of Nations, Marxists might extol the brave new world created by the Russian Bolsheviks, but there was a widespread feeling, naturally at its strongest in defeated Germany, that the lights had indeed gone out in Europe. The time was ripe for a challenge to the whole philosophy of progress, and the challenge was delivered in Spengler's *Decline of the West*. To the concept of continuous unilinear historical development Spengler opposed a pluralist doctrine; history for him was the record of many distinct civilizations* in various epochs of time and regions of the world, comparable to individual animal organisms, each with its own life cycle of birth, growth, creative prime, old age, and death. Each civilization had an essential quality that was unique, but all were equivalent in their corresponding phases, just as the stages of life of individuals in different generations—childhood, adoles-

cence, and so on—correspond in each case. It followed from this theory that, as each civilization had its own death as well as its own life, there could be no general progress of mankind, except insofar as the accumulated diversity enriched the experience of the contemplative historian standing outside the process as a detached observer.

THE most significant part of Spengler's doctrine was his theory of cultural decline as applied to the West. According to Spengler, the final stage in the life cycle of a civilization is an era of stability, but decreasing vitality, brought about by forcible political unification and institutional uniformity over the whole geographical area covered by the civilization. Having started with *Kleinstaaterei* and the maximum of local diversity and variety, the system only reaches its highest point of unity, order, and stability when its culturally creative period is already over. The prime analogy for this concept is the history of the ancient world which attained its political unity in the Roman Empire only after Hellenism had virtually come to the end of its creative achievement in philosophy, science, and the arts. Spengler inferred that Western civilization (which he considered to have been born in the period of confusion after the break-up of the Roman Empire) had in the 20th century likewise passed the zenith of its creative power and reached the point at which nothing remained for it to do but proceed to the construction of an imperial world-state. It was vain, according to Spengler, for Western man to rebel against this destiny, for it was determined by inexorable laws of history, and an aging civilization could no more renew its youth than an old man could win supremacy in the boxing ring.

The political implications of Spenglerism in the context of post-1918 Germany are only too obvious. Spengler rejected as utopian illusions the ideals of both Wilson and Lenin; at the same time he warned the Germans that there could be no going back to pre-Bismarckian German culture. The lesson to be learned from the national catastrophe

*Spengler distinguishes between a "culture" and a "civilization," reserving the latter term for the final phase of a "culture." But in referring here to Spengler's theory, the more normal English usage is followed.

was not to renounce Bismarckian blood and iron, but to have more of it; Spengler hailed "the return of the Caesars" and hinted that the Prussians could still be "the Romans of the modern world." His *amor fati* was not merely submission to a repellent necessity, but was mingled with an element of pleasure; it was sad to think that Western civilization could never again produce a Shakespeare or a Beethoven, but there was consolation for a German in the prospect of a German world empire—especially after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. Spengler was not a racist, but his intellectual influence was one of the factors that prepared the way for Hitler.

Historical pluralism, however, made its appeal not only to would-be Caesarian bidders for the salvage of an allegedly degenerate civilization, but also to philosopher-historians who had quite different reasons for believing in its degeneracy. For certain thinkers whose outlook was shaped by a deeply religious temperament, and for whom the inner meaning of a culture lay in its religious faith, the West was in decline and was threatened with catastrophe, not because the democracies had been so unkind as to break the military power of the German Reich, but because for more than two centuries Western civilization had set aside its traditional religious inspiration and developed on secularist lines. As Professor Toynbee puts it in the fourth of his Reith Lectures:

This great spiritual revolution overtook the Western world towards the close of the 17th century, when a hundred years' trial of waging savage and inconclusive civil wars under the colors of rival religious sects had at last disgusted the Western peoples, not only with wars of religion but with religion itself. The Western world reacted to this disillusioning, self-inflicted experience of the evils of religious fanaticism by withdrawing its treasure from religion and reinvesting it in technology; and it is this utilitarian technological excerpt from the Bible of our Western civilization, with the fanatical religious page torn out, that has run like wildfire round the world. . . .

FOR anyone who accepts the *Weltanschauung* of Saint Augustine and places the

real significance of human life in a "City of God," it is, of course, quite logical to regard Western civilization as having fallen into a decline with the "great spiritual revolution" of the 17th century. In comparison with the fatal defection from religious faith, only secondary importance can be attached, from this point of view, to the advance of science from the time of Descartes, to the vast increase in material productivity and control over natural forces since the first steam engines, to the development of parliamentary government, freedom of speech, and political democracy since 1688, or to the more recent growth of policies of social welfare for extending the benefits of modern knowledge and material well-being from privileged minorities to the masses. It must be emphasized that a man of strong religious conviction is quite entitled to hold the belief that the last two and a half centuries, which have seen changes in human life more profound and far-reaching than any others since the invention of agriculture, have been on balance a regress rather than a progress, and he has two world wars, the gas chambers of the SS, and the murderous farces of Communist state trials to adduce in support of his argument. But it is also clear that anyone who holds such a view cannot be reckoned a wholehearted defender of those Western values which are not directly based on religion; he necessarily sees Western civilization in its present crisis not as a progressive way of life and thought under heavy attack by malign destructive forces, but as a sinful society getting what it deserves.

Professor Toynbee regards Western civilization as fundamentally a creation of the Christian religion, but considers that during the last two and a half centuries it has been "post-Christian." It is during this last period, however, that it has spread over the whole world, either through colonization from Western Europe or through the adoption of Western technology by non-Western peoples. Professor Toynbee contrasts this recent spread of "secularized" Western civilization with the earlier resistance of Eastern countries to the propagation of Christianity, and

finds in it an illustration of a law of "encounters" between civilizations

... to the effect that a fragment of a culture, split off from the whole and radiated abroad by itself, is likely to meet with less resistance and therefore likely to travel faster and farther than the culture as a whole when this is radiated *en bloc*. Our Western technology, divorced from our Western Christianity, has been accepted not only in China and Japan, but also in Russia and in many other non-Western countries, where it was rejected so long as it was offered as part and parcel of a one and indivisible way of life, including Western Christianity as well.

BUT what exactly is the relation between Western technology and Christianity? This is not a question of approval or disapproval, but of historical judgment. If Western technology were a sort of emanation of the Christian faith, we should expect to find it developing just as much in Eastern Orthodox as in Western Catholic Europe, and more strongly in medieval than in modern times. In fact, however, its phenomenal growth in association with free scientific thinking has been characteristic of the "post-Christian" period, and before its decisive forward movement in the 17th century its tradition goes back to the revival of classical Greek studies in the Italian Renaissance, with sporadic medieval forerunners, all in contact in one way or another with Greek origins. Modern science and technology indeed belong not to the Christian but to the Hellenic part of the inheritance of Western civilization. The most Christian part of our history was the medieval—the age of Peter the Hermit and Saint Bernard, of the Gothic cathedrals and the Scholastic philosophy of Dante and Aquinas.

But from the period of the Renaissance, Western Europe has developed along different lines, and although retaining a rich legacy from the medieval world, its civilization has been in essentials a renewal and continuation of the Hellenic. This basic fact is obscured in Professor Toynbee's historical scheme, as in Spengler's, by the concept of Western civilization as a unit quite distinct from the Greco-Roman. According to both Spengler and Toynbee, the Hellenic or

Greco-Roman civilization completed its life cycle and came to an end before Western civilization was born. There is a relation of the later to the earlier system which Professor Toynbee calls "affiliation," but this does not affect the basic separateness. On this view there is no fundamental break in European history between Charlemagne and the 20th century, but there is a fundamental break somewhere between Augustus and Charlemagne. Moreover, there is a geographical displacement as well as a succession in time. For Professor Toynbee, Western civilization has belonged from the beginning to Northern Europe rather than to the Mediterranean; in one of his books he says that its homeland lies between Winchester and Cologne. This "Gothic" bias represents the opposite pole of historical interpretation from the anti-medievalism of the school of Gibbon; both extremes involve a distortion, but the Gibbonian goes less wide of the mark for an understanding of the antecedents of the modern world.

IF IT is once admitted that modern science and technology belong not to the Christian but to the Hellenic tradition of our civilization, the problem of the separation of Western technology from Christianity does not arise. But another problem does arise—that of the separation of Western technology from the intellectual freedom and rationality which are the essence of the Hellenic tradition. For the scientific knowledge which through its application to production, transport, communications, and warfare has transformed the material conditions of life all over the world is historically the product of a certain mental attitude—the "methodic doubt" of Descartes, the refusal to accept any proposition merely on authority, whether scriptural, ecclesiastical, or governmental, the claim to subject every doctrine to critical analysis and every hypothesis to the test of observation and experiment. Can, then, the technology which has been the outcome of this freethinking activity be separated from it and become an independent cultural factor developing on its own?

We may extend the question even further and ask whether Western technology can in the last resort flourish without political liberty also. Historically, Greek freedom of thought was closely linked with the citizen rights of city-republics, and a similar connection is found again in modern European history. It is hardly possible in the long run to combine an unrestricted critical activity of the mind in the field of natural science with an unquestioning acceptance of authority in everything that concerns human society and government. Either the mind in its study of nature is brought under the control of religious or ideological authority, or else the critical spirit invades the realm of politics. The essence of political democracy in fact is not the universal franchise (which can be a mere empty form, as in the "elections" of totalitarian states), but freedom of criticism, extending both to the institutions of society and to the particular policies, acts, and statements of governments. It is true that there have been cases of patronage of free scientific thought by "enlightened despots," and from this it may be inferred that there is no essential incompatibility between intellectual liberty and authoritarian government. But these exceptional conditions have been due, partly to a disjunction, and even conflict, between the spiritual and temporal authorities in society, and partly to unawareness on the part of rulers of the risks incurred in allowing men to think freely. After the French Revolution the defenders of monarchical absolutism were less disposed to tolerate *philosophes*, and Metternich was quite right, from his own point of view, when he said of both religious dogmas and principles of government that "to discuss them is often dangerous and always useless." In our time the ruling parties of totalitarian regimes are fully alive to the anti-despotic tendencies of uncontrolled critical thinking; they combine both ideological and political authority in complete fusion, and they set out to suppress any questioning either of their basic doctrine or of their particular versions of fact.

When he comes to consider whether Western technology can be successfully adopted

by non-Western civilizations in detachment from its original context, Professor Toynbee is not entirely consistent. He speaks of "the almost worldwide dissemination of a technological splinter flaked off from our Western civilization since the close of the 17th century." On the other hand, he quotes examples showing that the adoption of Western technology by Eastern peoples has usually been followed by important social and political changes and that rulers who thought they could have a Western-style army and navy without affecting traditional ways of life have often got more than they bargained for. Thus we are told how Mehmed Ali of Egypt engaged European experts to run an arsenal without any idea of undermining Islam, but the Europeans insisted on starting a maternity hospital for their families, and Egyptian women then also began to frequent it, causing a breach in Moslem religious custom. Similarly, Sultan Abdul Hamid of Turkey did his best to suppress liberal opinions in his realm, but sent young army officers to Western Europe for military training, with the result that they became carriers of the forbidden thoughts. Industrialization brings even greater havoc, and Gandhi, though he became India's national leader, signally failed to persuade his countrymen to retrace their steps to a pre-industrial economy. Western technology has indeed everywhere disrupted the traditional cultures of the East. The question of today is no longer whether they can be preserved intact, but whether their transformation will reflect predominantly Western liberal or Marxist-Leninist influence.

RUSSIAN Communism has three great advantages for competing with the West in Asia. In contrast to the Moslem, Hindu, and Confucian traditional cultures it is, as Professor Toynbee calls it, a "Western heresy"; it is of the modern world, mechanized, industrial, even nominally democratic. At the same time it is completely authoritarian, and thus fulfills yearnings for a father-priest-king among peoples accustomed over millennia to religious direction and autocratic monarchy. Finally, by anti-imperialist propaganda

it can exploit all the jealousies and resentments evoked by the era of Western power ascendancy and expansion. Nevertheless, in view of these advantages which Communism enjoys, what is remarkable in the recent history of Asia is not that Moscow has had so much success, but that it has had so little. Against the Communist victory in China must be set the liberal-democratic developments in Turkey, India, and Japan. Though the danger of a Russo-Chinese conquest of Asia remains, the situation from a Western point of view provides no cause for despair.

But what is of supreme importance in the contest of ideologies is that the liberal West should manifest faith in its own values. Faith in political liberty, in toleration and freedom of thought, in a critical, rational attitude towards life, cannot, of course, have the same quality of fanatical devotion which imbues the adherent of a totalitarian doctrine. Yet there is such a thing as faith in freedom itself which the finest minds of the West in modern times have always felt as having the force of religious belief; it needs again to be proclaimed as a gospel by those who accept it. To repudiate it is to abandon Western civilization—as so many restless spirits seeking short cuts to paradise have in fact done.

The *trahison des clercs* is indeed the fundamental threat to the Western way of life; it has more of danger in it than any menace of mere military conquest. Our very freedom forbids that intellectual desertion should be countered by persecution, but this renders it all the more necessary that it be fought with the weapons of the spirit.

UNFORTUNATELY Professor Toynbee must be counted among the deserters. For him "secularized" Western civilization is past praying for. Dwelling on his favorite theme, he writes:

We Westerners were gratified when we saw the Japanese and Chinese who had rejected our Western civilization in its religious version, accepting it in a secularized version, in which technology instead of religion had been given the place of honor. . . . But we have lived to

see this secular Western dispensation disappoint us in both countries. In Japan it bred a disastrous militarism; in China it bred a disastrous political corruption. . . . In offering the Chinese and Japanese a secularized version of our Western civilization, we have been offering them a stone instead of bread, while the Russians, in offering them Communism as well as technology, have been offering them bread of a sort—gritty, black bread if you like to call it so; but that is still an edible substance that contains in it some grain of nutriment for the spiritual life without which man cannot live.

Professor Toynbee apparently finds food for spiritual life in the fanaticism of Communist belief, even though it is godless, but none at all in Western ideals of a disinterested search for truth, political liberty, and respect for human rights. He does not himself, however, like the "gritty" flavor of Communism, so he seeks his own religion elsewhere. Rather surprisingly, in spite of his nostalgia for the Gothic past, he does not look forward to a revival of Christianity. His hopes are set on the future emergence of a new universal religion, which, by drawing on analogies from ancient history, he suggests is due to arrive shortly.

We might be consoled in our troubles by this prospect if we could feel sure that the new religion would really have a chance to do its work. But if we just sit around waiting for it, mankind may fall under totalitarian rule in the meantime, and it is difficult to see how the new religion could then ever get started. The Caesars of the post-liberal era would certainly not allow an insurgent faith to be propagated by glorious martyrdoms; all that, as George Orwell has explained in *Nineteen Eighty-four*, is now quite out of date. If Nero had had the resources of the MVD at his disposal, the early Christians would have been publicly confessing how in their vileness they had set fire to Rome on the instructions of the King of Parthia. In these days, it seems, a certain minimum of liberty is essential even for the spread of a new religion. So perhaps the unspiritual West can still prepare the way for the future messiah simply by defending such poor principles as it has.